
Remarks by Ambassador Louise V. Oliver

To the President's Committee on the Arts
And Humanities on Film, Television, Digital
Media and Popular Culture

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Thank you, Frank, for that kind introduction. I am so pleased to be able to join you at this interesting and timely conference, and to have an opportunity to see Adair Margo, Dana Gioia, Bruce Cole and other good friends who, like you, have given such strong support to the work of the U.S. Mission to UNESCO.

There is no question that issues involving culture are a powerful force in the contemporary international political environment, and increasingly drive much of the work of today's UNESCO. When UNESCO's member states talk about the need to strengthen their cultures, they are not just talking about films, music, and art: they are talking about their national identities, their traditions, their values, their languages, and their lifestyles.

Since many of them are convinced that their national identities are being threatened by globalization, their immediate, and often emotional, reaction is to find ways to preserve and protect their cultures. UNESCO, as the UN organization with the C in its name, has become the vehicle that countries use to defend themselves from globalization, or as also described by some at UNESCO, homogenization, or cultural imperialism.

For most countries at UNESCO the predominant face of globalization, particularly in the area of culture, is the U.S. They see our films, our music, our art, our high culture, our popular culture, everywhere, and it is not simply because we have such high caliber and effective marketing and distribution mechanisms. It is because we have great American filmmakers, great American artists, great American music, great American dancers, great American writers and poets. It is not by coincidence that American culture has such universal appeal.

The international draw of American culture was brought home to me when I attended a dinner last month at the home of the Indonesian Ambassador to UNESCO. I was late to the dinner because I had been in an all-day meeting at UNESCO on another cultural matter—UNESCO’s response to the well-known Islamic cartoon issue. When I walked into the Ambassador’s living room, I saw a large TV set with English words going across the screen. In front of it was a group of my fellow Ambassadors singing loudly into microphones, having a karaoke party. The Ambassadors from Indonesia, Japan, Fiji, Costa Rica, Lithuania, and many other countries were all belting out American pop songs.

The amazing thing was that even though they came from all parts of the world, they were all familiar with American pop culture, including songs that I had never heard of. For me, the most amusing part of the entire evening was hearing my colleague, the Ambassador of France, whose country has been particularly vocal in criticizing American culture, singing with great passion, “Stand By Your Man”.

A week later I was visiting a beautiful old town in France called Vezelay, where there is an early Romanesque basilica that has been designated one of UNESCO’s 812 World Heritage Sites. As I walked up a steep hill towards the basilica, I thought to myself, this street reminds me of San Francisco. At that very moment a French car came roaring past me with the song, “San Francisco”, blaring from its windows.

Last week, when I called to get a cab in Paris, the music that played in the background while I was on hold was “New York, New York”. Even in France, a country that has tried to erect so many barriers to American culture, American music is everywhere.

So we are confronted with the situation where globalization has made American culture—the good and the bad---seemingly ubiquitous, and various governments feel that they need to do something about this state of affairs. In addition to being worried that they are losing out economically, they are concerned that their own cultural industries and heritage are endangered.

These sentiments all came together during the past several years at UNESCO with the passage of two normative instruments (international

treaties) that are designed to protect “culture”. The first instrument, the Convention for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage, was adopted by UNESCO’s General Conference in 2003, just as the U.S. was returning to UNESCO after a 19-year absence. This convention is just now going into effect as it has been ratified by more than 30 countries, though not by the United States. The parties to this convention face a formidable task in deciding which of the myriad forms of intangible human cultural expressions are most worthy of protection.

The second instrument, the Convention on the Promotion and Protection of Cultural Expressions, also known as the cultural diversity convention, was adopted over strong U.S. objections last fall at UNESCO’s 2005 General Conference. One of the reasons that the United States voted against this flawed convention is that it would put decisions about culture in the hands of governments to too great an extent, and focus on cultural protection rather than on cultural promotion.

So what can the U.S. do at UNESCO in the area of culture, given the concerns about globalization and homogenization that exist at the organization? One thing we can do is to support UNESCO programs that actually do promote cultural exchange and real diversity, such as UNESCO’s program entitled The Global Alliance for Cultural Diversity.

This is a program that tries to help develop sustainable cultural industries in developing countries and in countries in transition by strengthening public-private partnerships and providing technical assistance. One of the Alliance’s many members is the MPA, which last year held workshops in Colombia to teach the Colombian film industry how to market their films.

Contrast this kind of capacity building approach to the recent complaints I heard from some of the African members of UNESCO who, although grateful for the production subsidies they receive from France and the European Union, are frustrated because once the films are made, they are never shown outside the country of production because they receive no help marketing their films. Certainly protectionist measures that inhibit the international marketing and distribution of films could hurt those from small producers, not just those from the U.S.

Since the Cannes Film Festival has just begun in France, newspapers are filled with stories on the American film industry, some of which illustrate

how concerned some countries are with U.S. dominance in the audio-visual industry. Given the fixation on the U.S. film industry, further initiatives beyond what the MPA has been doing in Colombia could be particularly effective.

Equally important is for the U.S. Mission to organize cultural programs at UNESCO. By that I mean for the international community that comprises UNESCO. Last year, thanks to support from Dana Gioia and the NEA, we organized programs for our UNESCO colleagues that featured blues music, the American novel, and American poetry, all of which were very well attended.

After the program on American poetry, an Ambassador from one of the Arab countries told me that until our event, he generally associated Americans with things like tanks and bombs, but that henceforth he would start to think of us as a people who appreciated poetry. In my view, the best of American films would also find a receptive audience at UNESCO.

This conference is a positive step towards discussing some of these important international issues. I hope we can come up with some ideas for some new initiatives, especially in the audio-visual area, and I look forward to talking about all of this in more depth with my fellow panelists.

Thank you.